

# ALL THE YEAR ROUND

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## UNCLE BOB'S NIECE.

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### CHAPTER XXVIII.

MR. BEHRENS had come back, and Mr. Behrens now meant business.

The months, which he had seemed to waste in maturing a friendship which apparently could not give him any particular pleasure, were not lost. As a man who had had to do with men, he made them his particular study, and no subtle hint that helped to illustrate character was left undiscerned by him. As knowledge of the world usually argues, by implication, acquaintance with its seamier side, so knowledge of men seems to suggest a quick eye for human weaknesses and frailties. Mr. Behrens's calm, keen vision, at least, occupied itself more with blemishes than virtues, and his habit of conversational reticence helped to sharpen his naturally quick observation.

He was a delightful listener, and thus, oddly enough, came to have the reputation of being a charming converser.

"I had a capital talk with Behrens," some gratified babbler would say, after an hour's monologue, to which Behrens had only lent an attentive ear. He knew how to gratify this desire for talking which is native to a good many people, and his considerate and respectful reception of their superfluities of opinion made him a great favourite. There was no reason at all why he should not be a favourite; there was not so much as a shadow against his fair reputation. He had, on the contrary, many qualities to recommend him. He was a handsome man and a courteous one;

and whatever his opinion of human nature, as illustrated by his fellow men, may have been, he kept it in decent privacy.

The scraps of talk concerning his public and private affairs which Major Drew had been able to extract from a mutual acquaintance, were all correct. He had inherited some money, and had made it more by judicious speculation; he lived handsomely, having married a wife above him in station, whose graces and accomplishments gave an air of refinement to his entertainments, and to whom he was a perfectly indulgent husband. He had refrained from introducing her to acquaintances made so irregularly as the Burtons, not because he was ashamed of them—as a student of humanity he held himself above such considerations—but because he felt that they fell short of her standard, and he was too amiably disposed towards pretty Tilly to submit her to his wife's possible coldness.

This, then, was the man whom accident had thrown in the way of the Burtons. He had been living, during the absence of his family abroad, at the hotel to which Fate led them. It was all plain and open to investigation; even Miss Walton could detect nothing to cause alarm in so perfectly respectable a record, and her dislike of him probably arose from that impulsive habit women have of making first impressions into fixed opinions.

Was it, then, all pure benevolence which led him to attach himself to the raw Scotchman and to devote hours and days to his entertainment? Of course it was not; benevolence of this order does not belong to our world, and Behrens laid no claim to angelic qualities.

Bob Burton was hardly even a study worthy of his powers of analysis; anyone

might read the ex-shepherd, and know at once that his simple vanity stood out against a background of dense and solid stupidity; that he was incapable of saying anything clever or even of thinking it; and that other people's clever things were quite thrown away on him. Even his submissiveness to Behrens, and the eagerness with which he hung on him for guidance, must have lost some of their flattery by the form of their expression, for his "barren and untilled" manners lent them no grace.

A man, so limited in ideas that he had to beg or borrow all he owned, could not be very interesting to a gentleman so astute as his friend. He was not interesting, but his money was. Looked at as a capitalist he was bearable, endurable; when you came to view him as a man of practically unlimited credit, he was imposing. To know a man of means so extensive and not to know him better would have been almost criminal. Behrens, it will be seen, held much the same view as the Scotchman of the value of money: on that point they met and were at accord. They also suffered under a mutual anxiety to make Uncle Bob's big pile even bigger, and these two interests were enough to draw them together.

Uncle Bob wanted to make Tilly the biggest heiress in London; to marry her to Fred Temple; and then to stand aside and admire their mode of illustrating his power.

Mr. Behrens was quite willing that this should happen and quite willing to help it to happen, but he did not intend to work for Tilly's aggrandisement without reward. He had his price, though he refrained from stating it; and he had his own scheme, which he modestly kept in the background.

He began as we have seen by giving his friend a glimpse of a broker's office.

"I'm not a professional adviser—I'm a mere amateur myself," he said, when Mr. Burton asked that question about investments.

"You are far better than one," said Uncle Bob with delightful security.

"You are very flattering to say so," Behrens smiled. "I can let you see the way I went about the thing if you like."

Mr. Burton did like, and he went and he saw. If he had known anything about Midas, he would probably have held him to be a stockbroker; but his education having lacked the classical element, he

simply sat and stared. The astonishment of an unstored mind, such as his, does not find very ready expression in words; this way of making money was altogether new to him, and it seemed to him almost uncanny. The immense solitude of the Australian plains, in the days when he reaped wealth from them, had offered no such impetus to a sluggish imagination: in the company of his sheep he had come perhaps to deserve the reproach of the American satirist and to "think mutton"; in that patriarchal life the riches, at least, had grown insensibly, invisibly; here you saw the process before your eyes; you felt it in every heart-throb, in every leap of the pulse.

On the first day he sat and watched and said nothing. When Behrens came back to his side, released from the greetings of many acquaintances, Uncle Bob demanded to be taken somewhere for lunch; the calls upon his powers of wonder having aroused that insatiable tiger within that needed so much cajoling.

When he had eaten and drunk, he asked for an explanation.

"It's simple enough," said Behrens with a smile, and thereupon he discoursed on "bulls" and "bears," of stocks and of cover. When the functions of a bull and a bear had been made clear to a slow apprehension, the questioner wanted to know what "cover" meant.

"Cover," explained Behrens, "is a sum you place in the hands of a broker to secure him from loss. For ten pounds you may become the holder of one thousand stock. If the prices go in your favour, you are the gainer; if, on the other hand, the stock goes down, you only lose the sum you deposited."

"Well!" said Uncle Bob, with a whole volume in the word. His elbows rested on the little table at which they had lunched; he joined and separated the tips of his broad fingers once or twice while he stared over them at his friend.

"You can make a lot and lose next to nothing?"

"That exactly expresses it."

"Have you done much in this line?" he next demanded.

"A little," said Behrens with a modest smile.

"And you've been successful?"

"So people are pleased to say." He kept silence a moment; but the other's questioning eyes seemed to draw a fuller explanation from him. He proceeded to

an illustration; it was a small illustration, for he was not a person to boast, but he came out of it triumphant.

"You made seven hundred pounds on a ten-pound cover?"

"It is done every day."

Uncle Bob brought down his big fist on the table with the accompaniment of a forcible epithet.

"Why shouldn't I do it?" he asked.

"I see no reason in the world why you shouldn't," said Behrens, calmly. "If you like to amuse yourself that way, there is no one who has a better right."

"Do you do it to amuse yourself?"

"That's another affair. My income can never conceivably approach yours, and a loss which would be nothing to you, would be a serious blow to me."

This was a view of the matter which the man of millions rather liked; it showed a proper respect for his wealth; at the same time he was far from wishing merely to amuse himself.

"I want to be richer," he said with a dogged brusqueness. "If we come to figures, I guess there aren't many men I couldn't buy up as easy as look at them; but I mean that there shouldn't be one."

"A very laudable intention," said the listener gravely.

The next day he took his first lesson.

"What am I to buy?" he asked.

His friendly adviser recommended Brighton A's. The monthly traffic statement was excellent, and the stock were sure to advance. Mr. Burton took five thousand at one hundred and twenty-five-and-a-half, and in less than an hour, he had made one-and-a-half profit. The money was as a new-found treasure to him. He prized it as much as if he were not the possessor of sixpence; he who was burdened with a plethora he hardly knew how to rid himself of. It was more to him, seemingly, than it would have been to his nephew, John Temple, who drew the magnificent income of one hundred and fifty pounds a year from the Bank; but then it was not merely so many notes—it was an emblem, a type; it was the first drop of a shower—a shower of gold which was to make him the most envied man in England.

He would not spend the cheque the broker made out for him, not even on Tilly. He took it home and looked at it from time to time with immenso respect; but for the mirth so odd a proceeding would have roused in Tilly, he would have had it framed.

Thenceforward his generous adviser became more and more to him, and the City, with the broker's office for its central attraction, was Uncle Bob's true home. With the strange luck that had followed him all his life, his speculations mostly prospered. He leaned on Behrens with a confidence which was a flattery, and he was careful to recommend nothing that entailed a risk. As yet the stakes for which his pupil played were all small. When Burton, used to the sound of large rolling sums, complained of the triviality of his transactions, and wanted to hazard some large amount, his Mentor always counselled prudence, and the wisdom of waiting and looking about. Never was man so careful of a friend's interest; so disinterested, so cautious.

"I'll keep my eyes open and tell you when there's anything going," he said.

"You may trust me."

And indeed Uncle Bob might safely trust him, and might have accepted the assurance without expressing himself so grateful for it, seeing that the good thing when it came, would not leave Behrens without reward. That was how the passion for speculation arose, and that was how it grew till it absorbed and swallowed up every other interest.

"Is your business with Mr. Behrens always going on?" Tilly asked one day rather wistfully.

"It's going on till I'm the richest man in England," he answered. "It may stop then if it likes—not before."

"Wouldn't the second richest content you?"

"No," he said, "it would not. I mean you to be the biggest heiress about, and I won't stop short of it."

She sighed, but she said no more. For herself a great deal short of the biggest would have pleased her; but she knew nothing of a speculator's hazardous joys.

#### CHAPTER XXIX.

PERHAPS if Tilly had not been left very much to her own devices by an uncle who became more and more engrossed in the business of money-making, it would have gone less well with Fred. It was impossible, however, to hold out in cold ingratitude against a young man who used such flattering arts for the consolation of her loneliness.

Fred was very much in love and very much in earnest. When he reviewed his

circumstances, as sometimes, very greatly against his will, he was forced to do, he would anxiously weigh his chances and ponder what he could do to improve them. It was very necessary for him to succeed; it was vital, indeed, to his comfort. If he failed, there would be no more smiles and honeyed phrases from the ridiculous physician at home; the Doctor's ridiculousness would take a much less pleasing form, and his cheques would cease. Creditors would also present themselves in their true light; they would no longer respectfully beg a remittance, they would demand one, and, if they did not get it, they would make things mightily unpleasant for the debtor.

It seems melancholy that a young man's love should be soiled by considerations such as these. In his better moments, Fred felt the position to be rather damaging to his good opinion of himself; but he found consolation in the excellent use he meant to make of Tilly's money, and in the liberality with which he meant to contribute to her happiness.

Doubtless most of us would find it easier to be amiable on unlimited means, and the privilege of bad temper ought to be left to the people whose ends will scarce meet, much less "tie in a handsome bow." If Fred were transplanted into plenty, the chances were he would make a perfectly irreproachable husband, and his own inner consciousness of this helped him to sustain his siege.

"I've squared it with the old boy," he would reflect, "and I think Tilly is yielding;" so his hopes whispered to him, and, on the whole, they were stronger than his fears.

Tilly was indeed yielding, perhaps in part because she did not know what else to do. Everybody expected her to decide in Fred's favour, and the expectations of other people have a larger influence on our decisions than most of us would like to own. Fred had walked, and ridden, and danced with her, and had seriously compromised her in the eyes of the Moxon school, who entirely ignore the brotherly or cousinly element in a friendship between two young people of the opposite sex. More than that, all those walks and talks, and innocent pleasantries had awakened hopes in Uncle Bob's heart which it was infinitely harder for her to disappoint. It might have given her a certain gratification to shock Mrs. Moxon, but it gave her none to wound her best friend.

Thus, when she came to ask herself seriously why she should not gratify her uncle and her lover, and win the approval of Mrs. Grundy as well, she found no satisfactory ground of objection. She did not care for anyone else. On that point she was emphatic with herself, and, though there might very likely be other Fred Temples wandering about the world who would want to marry her, there was no counting on the certainty that she should like them better.

Fred was likeable enough, if it came to that. He was a very sympathetic young fellow; almost as obliging in his changes of hue as a chameleon, taking his colour from the atmosphere in which he happened to find himself. It is a little hard on sympathetic people that they should be taxed with insincerity when they are doing their best to reflect their friends, and to share their tastes and opinions. Fred was not of set purpose insincere when he was with Tilly, and yet it was in her company that he reached his highest level.

If, when he left her, he fell in with some companion of an easier morality and went off with him to earn a morning's headache over billiards and the wine cup, what are we to think of him?

With Tilly, Fred was gentle—almost serious; her truthfulness, her innocent gaiety, her simple confidences, touched and moved him and made him wish to be better than he was. He swore that, if she yielded him her love, he would begin the new life for which even the worst prodigal is always longing, though he may seem to choose the husks and the swine. He breathed a purer air with her than he had known before, and he began to think himself in love with goodness. This softer, humbler mood made him very winning, and as he came and went, and did little things to please her, and was thoughtful of her and amiable towards her uncle, Tilly found that softening process beginning in her heart which ended in her surrender.

It was a very gradual process, however; and Fred showed the wisdom of the serpent in not pressing her too soon again for that answer he still held to be due to him.

But one afternoon when Spring was putting on those crude and cold airs she wears in her unripe youth, when Tilly was feeling rather dull and in sad companionship with the weather, it all came about.

"You are going to Mrs. Popham's to-night?" he asked. "It is to be something quite special and splendid, I believe. It is

to be an author's evening; the latest fad is the worship of literary genius. I only hope the lions will consent to divide the adulation without quarrelling over it."

"People who write books?" she asked. "What kind of books?"

"Anything you like; essays, historical fictions, and novels that tell nothing but the truth."

"What do they talk about?" she asked, growing more interested, and turning a pair of beautiful questioning eyes on him.

"I believe they talk about their own immortal works," said Fred with frivolity, "unless when they are throwing stones at their reviewers or cheapening one another."

"You make them out to be the meanest of people, and yet we find our best and most sustaining thoughts in their books," she said, with an edge of reproach in her voice.

"Perhaps they exhaust all their good things in print. I am speaking only of small authorship; our Madame Récamier isn't likely to attract famous writers to her salon. The smaller fry have hard enough work, I believe, to hold their heads above water, and it's a struggle for any of us to keep clear of envy, hatred, and malice, when another fellow gets anything we have set our hearts on."

"A good review—or a second edition?"

"Yes, or something much more worth coveting."

"The secret of 'Perpetual Motion,' perhaps?" There was a glimmer of fun in her eyes.

"Much more precious than that."

"That would make your fortune," she said; "that patent would make you rich for ever."

"But my heart's desire would make me happy for ever."

She had known it was coming, though no one would have said so impersonal a question as the idiosyncrasies of authors—about which neither of them knew anything—would have led straight to a love declaration. Women, however, have quick instincts, and she had divined his intention afar off.

She met it as only one girl in a thousand would have done—quite simply and without any affectation of mystery.

"Is it that you want me, Fred?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, reduced to simplicity too by a certain gravity in her tones; "it is you I want, Tilly."

"Are you sure—quite sure," she questioned. "Am I really and truly your heart's desire?"

"You are really and truly my heart's one craving; of that there can be no question. But there is a question—I never knew before how great—of my worthiness."

"Ah," she said with a little catch in her breath, "we must help each other."

Perhaps she already divined that she might need one day to be strong for him as well as for herself; but if so, she would not think of it now. It was a very quiet surrender, too calm and quiet perhaps, to match the whirl of emotions which made tumult in Fred and hardly allowed him to realise his triumph; and yet when he rose to go, after many words and vows, she suffered his kisses and she let her hands lie warm and soft in his.

"You will tell my uncle?" she said, and she blushed as her eyes met his. "It will make him glad."

When he left her with the promise of seeing her again that evening, she sank down again on the low seat she had occupied by the fire. "It will make him glad," she repeated, as if that made her chief gladness too. Then she fell to thinking of her lover, and wondering how life would unroll itself at his side. She was a little grave, perhaps; but she was not visited by any regrets, and she remembered Fred's whispered phrases with a smile of pleasure. And, if all this did not mean love, it at least was an excellent imitation of it, so good that it deceived both her lover and herself.

Uncle Bob took the news heartily, and celebrated it with much eating and drinking, and showers of presents which fell on all the household.

As for the ladies of the establishment, who had taken so deep an interest in the solution of Tilly's problem, they all basely professed themselves disappointed. Mrs. Moxon had so entirely disapproved of the manner and method of the courtship, that she could not consistently rejoice over its conclusion.

"It may be the mode in the middle ranks of life," she said; "I am without experience to guide me, but——"

"How odd!" interposed Honoria, with that awful simplicity she could assume; "were you married right off, without any of the preliminaries?"

Mrs. Moxon's dignity allowed of no reply to this challenge, and thus her objec-

tions were adroitly quenched. Mrs. Drew suffered a divided allegiance, and was one moment happy with the rejoicing lover, and the next sorrowful with the rejected one. As for Honoria, she cared neither for Fred's happiness nor John's misery, but she said it was a shame and a disgrace, that Tilly had been made to choose so soon, instead of waiting to honour a Marquis or a Duke, and she announced that she meant to give Uncle Bob "a piece of her mind."

She ended, however, by thanking him for a bracelet his bounty had bestowed on her; and, when she would have transferred her remonstrances to Tilly, she was wise enough to perceive that they came too late.

"Well," she said, "you've been in a hurry, Tilly."

"Do you think so?" said Tilly, opening her eyes; "it seems to me I've been taking a lifetime to make up my mind; but then it is a decision for a lifetime, and you must ponder a while before you can give any young gentleman so large a license."

"You should have waited," said Honoria, decidedly. "There are young men in every street who are quite as good as Mr. Fred Temple."

"You can't expect me to believe that," said Tilly with a laugh. "You will be convinced of his superior virtues before we are married, Honoria."

"Then," said Honoria, as if her conversion were likely to be a matter of time, "you don't mean to get married in a hurry?"

"I mean to get the full good out of being engaged, first. One shouldn't use up one's pleasures too fast, and when you are married you *are* married."

"That's why I'm not married," said Honoria, so gravely that they both laughed; and then they rushed at each other as girls will and embraced for no perceptible reason.

Honoria was in good spirits. It pleased her to consider herself very penetrating, and she foresaw, or fancied she foresaw, certain complications which might arise with hazardous consequences to the engagement and promise of piquancy and excitement to all beholders; but these forebodings did not hinder her from immediately launching into a discussion which has a perennial interest for the feminine mind.

Almost any kind of lover—even the least satisfactory—will do as a peg on

which to hang a wedding trousseau—an excuse to spread a wedding feast; and since every woman hopes to be married some day and has already rehearsed the ceremony a thousand times in her own private audience chamber, this kind of talk has a personal and vital interest which sustains it from generation to generation.

Man, being of a more sluggish habit of imagination, does not take such panoramic views of life and sees mostly the yard or two of road ahead of him. Uncle Bob had not yet heard the sound of the marriage bells that had made merry music in Honoria's ears; he had had his vision, too, but it was of gold; gathering, accumulating, heaped up till the glittering pile made every man in England wonder and envy; and when the last coin crowned it there should be a wedding and a spending such as never was seen or known before.

"You are pleased?" Tilly asked, more moved than she had yet been when he gave her his blessing.

"Just by ordinar' pleased," the lapse into his native speech proved it.

"Is he good to you?" she asked wistfully. "Will he be a companion to you?"

"Good to me—a companion?" he echoed with a puzzled laugh. "He's a young lad and I'm an auld kark—he's got all the road to travel that I've done wi' and left behind; you can't expect us to keep step together. As to good—he's got no call to be good to me that I know of—" his tones took a faint tinge of complacency. "Come to that, it's you and me that the goodness comes from."

"Ah!" she urged; "but will you give him the place I hold? Shall we be son and daughter to you? If he isn't going to be a son to you—I—"

"You'll be no wife of his!" he laughed, as if at an intended jest; but she was serious.

"I'll be no wife of his. I'll do nothing that will take me away from you."

"Look here, my lass"—he tried to speak easily, but his voice had a rough tenderness in it—"you and me—we've never cast out, and we never will. But on the day you wed wi' your sweetheart, it's his life you've got to choose. Mind, I don't say it's his blame. He's a gleg and a blithe young callant, and I like him well; but his ways are not my ways. It's all I can do to make sense of his clippit English tongue, let alone his notions; and, maybe—maybe he might come to think me a fash—"

"I see he isn't to your mind," she said quickly. Then she drew closer to him. "You can't part with me?"

"Ay, I can part with you," he said gently. "I can part with you to give you to the lad of your choice and mine."

"But why need there be any parting?" she persisted. "If I must take a husband, why must I lose an uncle? We'll make him one of us, if you like; but you are my first love," she said, with a laugh which was half a sob. "I am not going to desert you."

"You'll not go counter to his wishes?" he asked.

"Not if they are reasonable wishes. I've never obeyed you when you were unreasonable"—she tried to give a lighter turn to the talk—"and do you think I'm going to reverence every whim of a young fellow who might be your grandson?"

She broke away from him and would hear no more. She would not even listen to the fears that knocked at her heart for admission. Did he mean to hand her over to her husband and leave her, without taking part or lot in the splendours for which he had toiled? And Fred, would he be willing to acquiesce in this scheme? About her love for this old man there was no shadow of a question; but there might well have been a question of her love for Fred, since she found it so difficult to imagine a life unshared by other company than his.

She had decided—a little to Fred's surprise—to be present at that glorification of authorship, which was Mrs. Popham's latest whim. Fred would have liked to spend the evening with her at home, and to have had from her more of those assurances of which lovers never seem to have enough; but he was not even allowed to call for her and be her escort, since she had arranged to go with the Sherringtons and Miss Dicey, who, in virtue of their modest celebrity, were also bidden. Fred, therefore, did not see her till she was announced with her fellow guests. He had taken up his post near the door to watch for her approach, and, as he saw her, so radiant and beautiful, he felt a great rush of tenderness, and courage, and wonder at his own fortune, too soon to be displaced by envy and jealous doubts.

Why had she nothing but a smile for him, she who belonged to him? He would have liked to claim her before all the world; he coveted the words she gave to others; the grave interest with which

she listened to the drivelling idiotcies of those writing people. Jealousy is an ugly passion, and it did not look any handsomer because it was displayed on Fred's comely young face. It was quite visible to everybody, though possibly the company may have mistaken the origin of the malady, and put it down to the chronic sore of unrequited merit.

Fred refused to be amused by a scene which at another time would have fed his comic vein, and been rich in pleasantry for him.

Mrs. Popham's drawing-room was a little miniature world that evening, where many different humours had play; here were the modest, shrinking from notice and hiding their merit in corners; here were the bold, who love to make a bustle, fondly believing all the world to be as keenly conscious of their writings as themselves, and vainly hanging their hopes on a literary eternity. Perhaps, as Fred had said, there was no real genius present, no one with a soul large and simple enough to disentangle himself from the claims of an imperious self, and so free to give as well as to receive; a world in miniature where there were heart-burnings, and stirrings, and faintings by the way, yet not without its own poor moral ideal, the highest it could define for itself in a life where good intentions are so apt to be "dispersed among hindrances."

To Fred, in the anger of his disappointed hopes, it was all an impertinent mockery; there was affectation in the sad, gazelle-eyed gaze with which Mr. Sherrington viewed his fellow immortals; there was servility in the alacrity with which Miss Dicey caught at an introduction to a scribbler of more distinguished claims. It was all a vain show; a poor, empty, ridiculous delusion.

Mrs. Popham was too busy flitting about—a meagre figure against the background of talent—distributing her olive crowns of praise, to have a spare glance for this gloomy youth, and, when at last he found himself by Tilly's side, she met him with nothing but regrets for her uncle's absence.

Her heart was very tender towards the old man that night.

"I wish I could have persuaded him to come," she said, "it would have been a new scene for him."

"I don't think it's much in his line," said Fred coldly; "I should have imagined he'd have enough of this sort of thing at Yarrow House."

"Then you don't miss him?"

She asked the question, hardly knowing how it occurred to her; perhaps it arose from that unformulated dread in her heart which she refused to entertain.

"No," he answered, with pardonable candour. "I missed nobody but you."

"Don't you find it amusing?"

"No," he said with reproach, "I don't find it at all amusing. I find it vulgar and pretentious, and abominably slow."

"Oh, how severe!" she said lightly. "Perhaps you haven't been introduced to the nicest people. I have been talking to a young man who is a poet. He has been telling me the secret of making verse; it is almost as difficult as Perpetual Motion, but much more interesting."

Fred looked as if he would have annihilated the poet on the spot; but Tilly, perhaps guessing his design, put an arm in his and led him away. She was kinder to him after that, neglecting literature that she might smile on him; and the evening ended more hopefully than its outset had promised.

On the whole, Fred compared very favourably in looks with the rest of the company; but, then, nobody expects genius to be handsomely housed.

"Genius!" shouted Fred derisively; but Tilly persisted in the phrase. If Fred was better-looking than others, there was no reason why he should be so vain as to imagine himself cleverer also.

Tilly, it will be perceived, meant to practise a wholesome severity towards him now that he was her accepted lover; he was to be kept afar off, and only allowed to come near when he was on his very best behaviour.

### THE MIRACULOUS STATUE AT SAINT LO.

LAST summer, whilst passing a few days at Saint Lo, a picturesque little Norman town, I took up an old French guide-book, and was amused to find that the first place in the list of objects of interest in the neighbourhood was occupied by "une Image Miraculeuse." The description was so delightfully vague that my curiosity was at once excited. Did the miraculous refer to the origin of the statue; or were we to assume that the power of working miracles was claimed for a block of marble? In either case it was certainly

an object of interest, and I set off at once in search of it. My task was not difficult; no sooner did I pronounce the words "L'Image Miraculeuse" to the first person I encountered, than I was overwhelmed with offers of guides. These, however, I declined when I discovered that the statue was in the church close at hand.

Now the Church of Notre Dame is of a size and magnificence which one would scarcely expect to find in so small and unimportant a town as Saint Lo. It was begun in the thirteenth century, but not completed until the middle of the fifteenth. Like most of the churches built at that time, it is a huge pile with massive pillars, dark and gloomy excepting where the sun, shining through the old stained-glass windows, lights it up with weird splendour.

Just inside the great western entrance I found the object of my search, a statue of the Virgin, placed close to one of the great pillars—from which position she derives her name, "Notre Dame du Pilier." The pillar, as well as the wall behind it, is covered with votive offerings of every shape, size, and device. Of these, one sets forth how a mother in despair implored the Virgin to save her child, and her prayer was granted. On a second, it is the mother who, by the help of the Virgin, has been restored to her family. Others, more vague, speak of special blessings received; deliverance from some danger; a misfortune averted, or desire granted; these and a hundred others, varying from the clearest statement of a fact, to a fanciful description of a sentiment, each with a date and generally a name or initial attached, form a fitting background for "L'Image Miraculeuse."

The statue itself, rather under life-size, represents a simple, gentle-looking girl, holding in her arms an infant. Though evidently of modern date and of mediocre workmanship and design, it is free from all traces of the absurdity and vulgarity which characterise so many of the statues in country churches: nay more, "Notre Dame du Pilier" is not without a certain naïve grace of its own, as if faith and earnest feeling in the sculptor had striven hard to atone for his lack of genius and skill. In the child, too, there is a touch more of Nature than one generally finds in such productions. But unfortunately, some Curé, bent upon demonstrating his piety and taste, has effectually destroyed any charm the statue might possess by placing

on the heads both of the mother and the child golden crowns thickly set with mock stones. The effect is ghastly.

I could examine the statue at my leisure, for, as it was early in the day, I had the church to myself. I looked at it from every point and angle; from a distance and close at hand; but, at the end, I was more than ever at a loss to discover in what the miraculous charm of this piece of spurious art could consist. At length, wearied of trying to arrive at a conclusion, I sat down at a little distance from the statue, resolved to wait and see what elucidation Fate would send in my way. I had not been sitting more than a few minutes when the church door opened and a peasant woman entered, on her way to the market, to judge by her basket of butter and eggs. She had a bustling, business-like air, as if calculating the value of her goods, as she placed them on the ground. This done, she drew a prie-dieu close in front of the Virgin; smiled up at her as if at an old acquaintance, and in a second every care and trouble seemed to fall away from her. I gazed at the woman in amazement: her whole aspect was changed: she sat there, her eyes fixed with a real honest affection upon the face of the statue; there was no assumption of reverence, or awe; she looked at it as she might have looked at her own peasant mother, and her lips moved rapidly as if addressing one whom she knew would understand and sympathise with her haste. It was soon all over; in less time than it takes me to relate it, the woman was on her feet again, cheered and soothed, had seized her basket, and was out of the church.

For the next hour a regular stream of people entered; most of those who came were women—the men, I noticed, always wore a hesitating air as if afraid they were doing something not quite compatible with their dignity; but the women had no such scruple. The generality were of the poorer class—laundresses, market-women, small shop-keepers, who, in the midst of their work, yet found time to pay their devotions to the Virgin. It was always the same thing—a rush, as it were, from the busy world outside; a moment's prayer and then back to their work again; no washing of faces or putting on of bonnets: they came just as they were, in dirt and in rags: but they came.

Of course, amongst so many, some were careless or indifferent—there as a form, or

through custom; but these were few, the majority evidently came because they derived real comfort from their visit. One woman interested me especially. Though she was poorly clad, there was an air of faded respectability in her thin shabby shawl and neatly tied bonnet, and some attempt at tidiness in the dress of the little child she carried in her arms. But she looked pale and haggard; her eyes were sunken and red, as if with much weeping. There was something inexpressibly touching in her appearance, it bore such unmistakable signs of the struggle of life. The baby, too, had that aged, worn look, which comes so early to the children of the poor; it gazed around with odd bright eyes as if it knew so much already.

As the woman passed by my side, I noticed that she was weeping bitterly; not with the loud hysterical weeping which comes from angry feeling, but with the dull noiseless sobs which speak so plainly of despair. She put the child on the ground, and the little thing wandered up and down the long aisles, as if it were at home; it could not be more than two years old, yet it made its way composedly into the different chapels; examined in turn each of the Apostles; and looked up with keen enquiring glances at the old fresco of the murder of Becket, who seems to have passed some years at Saint Lo during his exile. There was no superfluous reverence in its tiny nature; for without a thought, it entered the most sacred precincts; ran its hand over awe-inspiring relics; peered down into the crypt; toddled over the graves of the old Abbots, all with that quaint old-fashioned air which sat so strangely on so small a frame. Clearly it was not the first visit it had paid to Notre Dame; clearly, too, the mother felt that there it was free from danger; for, from the moment she had set it down, she gave not a glance in its direction. She just sank down before the statue as if prostrate, and buried her face in her hands; from time to time, her frame shook with sobs; but she made no noise, and never raised her head. After a time, her sobs became more rare, and she glanced timidly at the statue; but only for a second, and then again she buried her face. At length, raising her head, she fixed her eyes with a strange expression of mingled peace and fear upon the Virgin, whilst tears coursed down her

cheeks, and her lips moved busily, as if in supplication. Gradually the tears were dried; fear was banished; and happiness—no, I cannot say that any touch of happiness came. Did she know the meaning of the word?—but peace and something near akin to hope, shone upon her face. Then, having kissed the hem of the Virgin's robe, and casting at her one look of heartfelt love and gratitude, she picked up her child and left the church. As she passed through the door, she gently kissed her baby; when she had entered, she had seemed scarcely conscious of its existence!

As the day wore on (for I still kept my post), visitors of a higher class were not lacking; the richer bourgeois; the owners of the little châteaux so plentiful in that neighbourhood; the officers' wives; Sisters of Mercy; all made their way to this corner and sat there, side by side; and with very few exceptions they seemed to go away calmer and happier than they came. I lingered hour after hour in shade of the pillar, but came no nearer to the solution of the mystery with regard to the miracles. At length, resolved not to be baffled, I followed out of the church a Sister of Charity, whom I had observed as being most devout in her worship. She was an elderly woman, with a gentle, peaceful face. I asked her humbly enough (for I felt as if I ought to know) why the statue was called "miraculous." For a moment, she looked aghast; such ignorance was to her incomprehensible; but when I told her I came from England, her astonishment vanished, and she muttered with a kind of pity in her tone: "Oui, oui, je le sais. On ne connaît pas la Sainte Vierge là-bas." Then, in her quaint Norman dialect, she poured into my ear a string of confused stories, concerning the various miracles which Our Lady of the Pillar had wrought in the neighbourhood. Unfortunately, as I soon discovered, most of these were related upon mere hearsay; in fact, when I pressed the point, the good lady confessed that she had not seen one of them herself; but, with her evidently, seeing was not necessary for believing, as her faith in the miracles as such was profound and unshakeable. She knew nothing about the statue, neither whence it came, nor by whom it was made. But the convent bell rang, and she hastened away.

So far, I had not made much progress; and, whilst hesitating as to what I should

do, I observed a handsome, intelligent-looking girl leaving the church. Summoning all my courage, I addressed her, and, explaining that I was a stranger, begged her to tell me why the statue was called "miraculous."

At first she appeared both puzzled and amused, and recommended me to apply to the Curé.

As I particularly wished to avoid having anything to do with the priests, I asked her just to tell me whether she herself had ever seen anyone cured of their infirmities in direct answer to prayer to the Virgin.

She looked at me for a moment earnestly, and then, without a trace of doubt, or of fear of ridicule, she told me that, one morning, the spring before, she had gone to church as usual, and whilst there a thin, emaciated woman had hobbled in on crutches. She seemed almost paralysed, and had had the greatest difficulty in reaching the statue. Once there, she had sunk down helpless. The priest, and the friends who had accompanied the woman, joined with her in prayer to the Virgin; and a few minutes later the woman arose, and, without the aid of crutch or stick, walked across the church to the high altar.

"Yes," said the girl calmly, as if she were relating the most natural thing in the world, "from that day she has walked as well as you or I. The crutches you may have seen by the side of the statue were hers. She left them there that day. She told me only the other day that, just as M. le Curé ended his prayer, she felt a strange sensation rush through all her limbs, and at that moment her strength returned."

I watched the girl keenly whilst she was speaking, and it was impossible to look at her and doubt her veracity. She was evidently telling me what she herself believed to be true; and, by further questioning, I discovered this belief in the Miraculous Statue to be shared by the greater part of the inhabitants of Saint Lo.

I left Saint Lo, and, as I wandered through Normandy, on every side I heard of preparations for a grand pilgrimage to Notre Dame de Lourdes. Hundreds of poor women were pinching and saving to scrape together the miserable pittance necessary for the journey. The lame, the halt, the blind, were all going; going, too, in the firm faith that the end of their troubles was at hand.

I came back to England to find that "Faith Healing"—the name our "Image

Miraculouse" assumes—in spite of the ridicule showered down upon it, counts its disciples by the hundred.

What does it mean? How is it possible for people in this practical, sceptical nineteenth century of ours to have this blind, irrational faith in the miraculous, which would have brought joy to the heart of a mediæval Bishop? And yet they have it. It is impossible to live amongst the Norman peasants—and in Normandy, perhaps, more than anywhere this blind faith is found—with their simple truthful natures, and believe them capable of deliberate life-long deception. And even if they were, what end would they gain by so doing?

It comes to this: a number of people believe that by kneeling before certain statues, or miraculous cures may be obtained. In other words, that there are localities from which prayer ascends to Heaven with a peculiar and all-powerful force.

Common sense and reason alike declare this to be impossible; and yet we cannot doubt the sincerity of the believers in these miracles. For this, surely, there can be only one solution. These miraculous cures are obtained—not by any means all of those reported, but enough to cast a halo of probability over the more doubtful—not by the help of any place or statue, but by the force of an overwhelming emotion.

After all, are not nineteen-twentieths of the ills to which humanity is heir, directly or indirectly connected with loss of nerve power? Is it not then possible that, under the influence of a strong emotion, the patient's whole nature may be so thrilled that an impetus may be given to the nervous system sufficiently strong to inspire it with new life?

As those women whom I watched felt their cares and troubles vanish by the force of the sympathy they fancied they were receiving from Notre Dame du Pilier, surely, under the same influence, the more imaginative might be so excited at the idea of casting off bodily ills by the help of the Virgin, that their bodies, strengthened by their faith and will, might really be freed from the evil under which they were suffering.

#### MIZPAH.

We never used the word while thou and I  
Walked close together in life's working way;  
There was no need for it, when hand and eye  
Might meet, content and faithful, every day.

But now, with anguish from a stricken heart,  
Mizpah! I cry; the Lord keep watch between  
Thy life and mine, that death hath riven apart;  
Thy life beyond the awful veil, unseen,  
And my poor broken being, which must glide  
Through ways familiar to us both, till death  
Shall, of a surety, lead me to thy side,  
Beyond the chance and change of mortal breath.  
Mizpah! yea, love, in all my bitter pain,  
I trust God keepeth watch betwixt us twain.

The lips are dumb from which I used to hear  
Strong words of counsel, tender words of praise;  
Poor I must go my way without the cheer  
And sunshine of thy presence all my days.  
But God keeps watch my ways and days upon,  
On all I do, on all I bear for thee.  
My work is left me, though my mate is gone;  
A solemn trust hath love bequeathed to me.  
I take the task thy languid hand laid down  
That summer evening, for mine own away,  
And may the Giver of both cross and crown  
Pronounce me faithful at our meeting-day!  
Mizpah! the word gives comfort to my pain:  
I know God keepeth watch betwixt us twain!

#### ALL HALLOW E'EN.

##### A STORY IN TWO PARTS. PART II.

A YEAR passed; a year spent pleasantly enough by Jack, partly at the Hall, partly on the Continent. He was very popular in his county; a keen sportsman, a good shot, and a hard rider, he was sure to find favour in the eyes of the country Squires; and equally sure, as the owner of Melville Hall, to find favour in the eyes of their wives and daughters. Handsome Jack Melville, with his brown face and bright eyes, and his never-failing good humour, was always a welcome visitor, no matter where he went. Everyone, high and low, rich and poor, liked him, and had a good word to say for him; but, although his name had been coupled with that of more than one fair damsel, he was still a bachelor, and seemed likely to remain so.

"The girls are all so charming that it is quite impossible to have a choice," he used to say in his half-laughing, half-serious voice, when Mrs. Wood, who had not yet abandoned all hope of seeing her Emily at the Hall, pointed out to him, in her most maternal manner, the advantages of the conjugal state, and hinted that the Hall required a mistress. "If it were only legal to have three or four wives, now—and, really, considering the alarming predominance of the female over the male sex, I am inclined to think it would be advisable—I should have no difficulty at all; but, in the present unsatisfactory state of the law, I am not inclined to run the risk of a gigantic failure."

But, although Jack laughed and jested, he felt the loneliness of his great house very op-

pressive sometimes, and often longed for some more congenial society than that of the country Squires, who were always ready to dine with him, and drink his wine, and vote him the best fellow going. Their long stories and endless political discussions used to bore Jack unutterably sometimes. Should he ever sink to their level, he wondered; he content with the narrow round of pleasures and duties which made up their lives; marry and bring up children, and grow red-faced, and fat, and narrow-minded?

But still, in spite of his occasional fits of boredom, the country life was pleasant, and suited him well enough; and he was inclined to grumble when some important business, connected with his estate, called him to town and detained him there during those months of September and October, which are so pleasant in the country and so insufferably dull in London. Jack, who knew scarcely anyone but his lawyer, felt the time hang somewhat heavily on his hands, and was unfeignedly glad, when, one morning, while strolling down Oxford Street, he met a friend—a Dr. Maxwell—whom he had not seen for more than four years.

The two friends were mutually pleased to meet again, and Jack, without much difficulty, was induced to accompany Dr. Maxwell home, and was introduced to his wife, a pretty, merry-eyed little woman, who welcomed him very cordially, and invited him to dinner on the following day. The party consisted of Jack, his host and hostess, and a young barrister, an Irishman with an inexhaustible supply of jokes and comical stories; and, as the dinner was good, the wine excellent, and the talk amusing, Jack thoroughly enjoyed himself. The young Irishman had another engagement later on in the evening, and left early. Soon after his departure the Doctor was summoned to a patient; and Jack went upstairs to the drawing-room, where Mrs. Maxwell was sitting alone.

She insisted that he should remain until her husband returned, and was so pleasant and amusing that Jack was quite surprised, when the little French clock struck twelve, to find how late it was. He rose with a gay apology.

"How quickly the evening has passed! I had no idea it was so late," he said. "I must go; say 'good-night' for me to your husband, please, Mrs. Maxwell."

"Don't go yet," and Mrs. Maxwell

declined to take any notice of the offered hand. "Arthur cannot be long now, and he will be disappointed if he returns and finds that you have left so early."

Jack glanced at the clock and smiled. "We quiet country people consider twelve o'clock late, Mrs. Maxwell. But I am in no hurry, and will wait, if you are sure that I am not wearying you."

"Indeed, no. Wait till Arthur returns, and then the carriage can take you to your hotel. It is a wild wet night. Listen," as a gust of wind swept down the street and rattled the windows loudly, "how the wind is rising. I suppose we must expect stormy weather now. This is the last day of October."

"Is it?"

Jack started and smiled thoughtfully. He had risen from his chair, and was now standing with one arm resting on the mantelpiece, and was looking down at the bright fire. His thoughts had gone back to that October night just a year ago now, when he had kept vigil in the old house, and to the mysterious visitor who had come and gone and left no trace behind to say who or what she was, or why she came! The mystery which surrounded her seemed as deep and as far from being solved as ever, he thought. He was so silent and his face had grown so strangely thoughtful all at once, that Mrs. Maxwell glanced at him curiously.

"What are you thinking about, Mr. Melville?" she asked.

Jack started at the words as if out of a dream. He looked down at her with a grave smile.

"I was thinking of a very strange experience which happened to me just a year ago to-night," he said, "and just at this hour! Do you believe in ghosts, Mrs. Maxwell?"

"To a certain extent. I am a Scotch-woman, you know, and all Scotch people are superstitious! I remember when I was a girl at home, we used to practise all kinds of small charms and incantations on All Hallow E'en," Mrs. Maxwell laughed. "What was the strange experience of which you speak so gravely, Mr. Melville, and which happened just a year ago to-night? Did you," she laughed again softly, "see a ghost?"

Jack looked at her eagerly.

"I don't know! I saw a mysterious figure, but whether it was flesh or spirit, I have never been able to ascertain."

"Tell me about it. I love ghost stories above all things," Mrs. Maxwell cried.

So Jack, encouraged and made eloquent by her interested face, told his story. He told her of his conversation with old Angélique; of the horror which his scepticism had awakened in the old woman's mind; how she had left the cloth, and food, and wine behind her, in the hope that he might repent of his refusal. He described the room where he sat; the stormy night; the wind which whistled round the house, and shrieked down the chimney, and crashed against the branches of the trees outside the house. He told her of his vigil; of the strange thoughts, and the weird fancies that had come to him as he sat alone in the silent night by the dying fire; of the superstitious awe which gradually had crept over his mind as he thought of his dear dead friend and sister, both of whom seemed so near to him, so present with him that night!

"I can't imagine why I did it. I suppose it must have been the influence of the hour, and of old Angélique's nonsense," he said, with a half apologetic, half agitated laugh. "I am not generally a superstitious man, nor given to indulge in idle fancies; but all at once, as I sat there, there came over me the most curious feeling—a feeling I cannot describe, but which was quite irresistible—that I must do as Angélique wished. I rose from my chair; I spread the cloth upon the table; I placed upon it the bread and wine; and then I flung the hall-door widely open, so that the spirits—if any there were about—might enter in, and eat and drink. Then I went back to my chair, feeling half amused and half angry at my own folly, and waited."

"And some one came?"

Little Mrs. Maxwell bent forward in her chair and looked at him with eager interest in her dark eyes. "Oh, do go on, Mr. Melville!"

"Yes, some one came," Jack replied slowly. "I was sitting almost opposite the door; it was partly open, and before it hung a velvet curtain just"—and he glanced at the drawing-room door—"like that one. The curtain was swaying to and fro in the wind, and as I watched it lazily I saw a shadowy white figure cross the hall with gliding, noiseless step, then a white hand was laid upon the curtain, and—Good Heavens!"

Jack started; he drew himself up to his full height and looked with eager, half-frightened eyes at the door. "See—there it is again!" he cried.

"What? what?" Mrs. Maxwell cried in a

voice almost as excited as his own, and she looked eagerly in the direction which his pointing hand indicated. As she looked, a slim white hand pushed the curtain aside, and a tall figure in a flowing white robe, with long yellow hair hanging over her shoulders, entered. The room was but dimly lighted—Mrs. Maxwell hated a glaring light, and would have nothing but wax candles in her drawing-room. There was plenty of light round the piano and mantelpiece; but the lower end of the room was all in deep shadow, and in the dimness the white figure which entered looked so ghostly and shadowy that Jack might easily be pardoned if, in the surprise and excitement of the moment, he fancied that his mysterious experience of a year ago was about to be repeated! Mrs. Maxwell looked and laughed softly.

"How you startled me! It is no ghost; it is only my Cousin Winnie," she said in a half-amused, half-disappointed voice. "She had a bad headache and would not appear at dinner. Come in, child. What do you mean by roaming about the house in that ghostly fashion?"

Winnie hesitated, advanced a little further across the room, and then paused and coloured vividly as she looked at Jack. "I thought you were alone, Annie. I would not have come in if I had known anyone was here," she said confusedly.

"It is only Mr. Melville. You have interrupted a most thrilling ghost story, Winnie. Please go on, Mr. Melville, I will introduce you properly to my cousin by-and-by. I really cannot afford to spoil the delightfully creepy sensation, which your thrilling ghost story has produced, by base conventionalities," Mrs. Maxwell laughed. "Please go on."

"Yes, please go on."

Winnie sank down in a graceful heap on the hearth-rug at her cousin's feet, and, resting her clasped hands on her knee, looked up demurely at Jack. "I do love a good ghost story."

Jack hesitated and coloured; Winnie's entrance had disturbed the flow of his eloquence. He looked down admiringly at her pretty pale face; at the flowing golden hair, on which the firelight was flinging all manner of warm reflections; at the clasped white hands; the loose, flowing dress she wore, which seemed to Jack's ignorant masculine eyes infinitely more graceful and becoming than Mrs. Maxwell's costly evening dress. Mrs. Maxwell looked up at him impatiently.

"Oh, do go on," she said. "Winnie, he was sitting alone just a year ago to-night in his ancestral halls, keeping the vigil of All Hallow E'en. He had observed all the sacred rites; had spread the cloth and placed food and wine upon it, and set the doors wide open; and just as he was relating that while he waited he saw a white figure cross the hall, a white hand drew the curtains back, and—just at this thrilling point you entered and interrupted him. Go on, Mr. Melville."

"There is not much more to tell."

Jack gave a little awkward laugh, for at her cousin's words Winnie had started violently. A vivid flush crossed her face, and she looked up at Jack with a strange expression in her dark eyes which startled and puzzled him.

"The figure—whether ghost or human I do not profess to say—entered. She took no notice of me, she did not even glance at me; but she crossed the long room with a slow, noiseless step till she stood by the table. She poured the wine into the glass and drank; she broke the bread and ate, all in silence, and, in a strange, ghostly fashion, then departed as noiselessly as she had entered."

"And you did not follow her?"

"After a moment or two I did; but, just at first, I was so startled and confused at the strange occurrence that I could only sit in my chair and gape at her, like the idiot I was," Jack answered frankly; "and when at last I rushed after her, I found the hall empty, the door wide open, but no trace of my visitor. Like a shadow she came, like a shadow she went! I should have thought that all that had passed had been a dream, had it not been that the half-emptied glass, and the broken bread upon the table, assured me that it was no dream, but a puzzling reality. Angélique, my old housekeeper, was, of course, firmly convinced that I had seen a ghost, and is more deeply rooted in her superstitious folly than ever."

"And you never heard anything more?"

Winnie asked the question in a queer, excited voice.

"No; I did all I could to solve the mystery; but a mystery it remains, and to all appearance will remain," Jack answered.

"It was very curious, was it not, Winnie? By the way, let me introduce you two to each other. Mr. Melville, this is my cousin, Winifred Wyverne, and this, Winnie, is the old friend Jack Melville,

of whom you have sometimes heard my husband speak."

Jack looked surprised, and Winnie smiled and held out a little white hand.

"We ought to know each other without a formal introduction, Annie. Mr. Melville's name was once as familiar in my ears as household words! Aunt Joan—Mrs. Melville, you know—used often to talk of you," she went on, with a faint blush and smile, to Jack. "She fancied you resembled her husband, and I believe that was the reason," and she smiled again, and glanced up into Jack's good-looking face, "she passed over the Durham Melvilles, and made you her heir."

"Lucky for me! I have often wished to meet you, Miss Wyverne, to ask if you have forgiven me for turning you out of your old home," Jack said eagerly.

"Turning me out? Nay, I had no right there," Winnie said simply, "but I was very fond of the dear old house. It is so pretty and quaint, is it not, Mr. Melville?—worth a hundred modern houses! And is not the little oak room, with the sliding panels and the secret cupboard, where the Royalists hid from their enemies in the old days, charming?"

Jack gave a deprecating smile and a shrug of his shoulders.

"I am afraid that I don't even know the room you speak of! You must honour me with a visit, Miss Wyverne, and introduce me to it, and tell me all the traditions of the house. Will you?"

"Perhaps, some day. I should like to see Melville Hall again," Winnie said in a musing tone.

"You have never been there since Mrs. Melville's death, have you, Winnie?" Mrs. Maxwell asked; and again Winnie blushed and laughed, and cast a comical, mischievous look at Jack.

"How could I, when there was no lady to invite me?" she said demurely; and then Doctor Maxwell entered, and the conversation was changed.

Jack went back to his hotel, charmed with his new friends. He had often longed to meet Winifred Wyverne, and now his wishes were realised. He had met her, and she was fifty times more charming than he had expected; her merry face and bright eyes seemed to float before his eyes as, having declined to use the carriage, he walked along the muddy streets to his hotel. Her sweet voice rang in his ears as he sat over the fire and smoked a meditative pipe before retiring, and mingled with

his dreams when at last, well into the small hours, he went to bed.

He saw her frequently during the next fortnight, and the time, which before had hung somewhat heavily on his hands, passed quickly enough as he escorted Mrs. Maxwell and Winnie to picture galleries, and theatres, and concerts, or rode with Winnie in the pleasant lanes, which still—though, alas! they are growing fewer and more remote day by day—still linger in the London suburbs. Before he returned home, he had succeeded in making Mrs. Maxwell, and her husband and cousin, promise to spend Christmas and the New Year with him at Melville Hall. Old Angélique had a lively time during the week which preceded their arrival. Jack, usually the most careless and least exacting of masters, had suddenly grown fidgety, and fussy, and nearly worried Angélique to death, with his endless instructions respecting the preparations for his guests.

"Now, are you quite sure that everything is just exactly as it used to be in Mrs. Melville's time, Angélique?" he said anxiously as, on the morning before Christmas Day, he looked into the long-unused drawing-room, where Angélique was taking the covers off the chairs and dusting the ornaments. "I don't want Miss Winifred to see any change. I want her to feel that she is coming home again; not to a strange house."

"Monsieur may depend upon me. Nothing is altered. I have given Miss Winifred the rooms which were hers before. Rest tranquil, Monsieur, she will be at home—soon;" and Angélique, who had now finished her work, flashed an amused look from her keen eyes at Jack, who was looking round with a somewhat dissatisfied expression.

What was it that the room lacked, he wondered? It looked painfully clean and prim, and unhomelike, and different to the pretty drawing-room in Cadogan Square. Flowers? Of course that was it—there were no flowers. Jack rushed out, and struck wrath and dismay into the soul of his Scotch gardener by ordering some of the best plants in the greenhouses to be sent into the house, and the choicest flowers to be cut for the vases. But, in spite of these additions, the room still lacked something to Jack's critical eyes. He found out what that something was, when, after dinner, he came with the Doctor into the room, and saw Winnie's lithe figure leaning back in a restful atti-

tude in a low chair by the fire. It was her presence he had missed, her presence which was needed to complete the scene. The room was perfect now, in Jack's eyes.

So Christmas came and went, the happiest Christmas Jack had ever known; and there were gay doings at the Hall. All Winnie's old friends came to welcome her back to her old home, and there was a constant succession of dinner parties and dances given in her honour. Doctor Maxwell returned home at the end of the week; but his wife and Winnie remained, at Jack's earnest entreaty, for a little longer. And, indeed, it was such an exquisite pleasure to Winnie to revisit the house she loved so well, and to meet her old friends, that the faint objections which she at first raised to the extension of the visit were easily overcome.

"I think it's quite time we were thinking of going home," she said to Mrs. Maxwell as they were sitting together in the drawing-room.

Jack had ridden over to the neighbouring town on business, and the two ladies were alone. The day was wet and stormy; no one had called, and they had spent a lazy, pleasant afternoon, gossiping by the drawing-room fire.

"Why this sudden determination, Winnie? I think you seem pretty well content with your present quarters," Mrs. Temple answered with a smile.

"So I am—too content, unfortunately." Winnie gave an answering smile; but it soon passed, and her face grew thoughtful. "If I remain much longer it will be as great a trial to leave as it was before; and I have no wish to suffer all that pain again."

"There is no need you should, my dear. You have but to say a few encouraging words, and Jack will invite you to remain here altogether," Mrs. Maxwell said quietly.

Winnie laughed, and coloured visibly.

"Nonsense, Annie! Jack is not a marrying man. We like each other, nothing more," she said carelessly. "I am glad the Hall has fallen into good hands, that he has not altered or modernised it. I love every stick and stone about the place; no other house will ever seem so much like home to me," she added thoughtfully.

She paused suddenly, and again the bright colour dyed her cheeks, for, as she said the last words, the door opened quickly, and Jack himself came in. His

face was flushed; his eyes were shining; there was a kind of triumph in his face as he crossed the room and stood on the hearth-rug, and looked down at Winnie. Had he overheard her last words, and, if so, what would he think of her? With a little effort she looked up at him and smiled.

"How cold you look, and wet, too! Will you have some tea, Mr. Melville?" she said, with a little nervous accent in her clear voice.

"If you please."

Jack's hand touched hers as he took the cup, and his eyes rested on her fair face with a long admiring gaze. How pleasant it was to come home thus; to find such a sweet welcome waiting for him! All the way home, as he rode wet and cold through the muddy lanes, he had pictured it to himself—the pretty old-fashioned room, the bright fire, the pleasant hour between the lights, that hour which several times during the past week he had spent tête-à-tête with Winnie. This taste of home life was new and inexpressibly sweet to Jack after his wandering, lonely life. If it could only last—only go on for ever, he thought! If he could but keep her there with him always!

Mrs. Maxwell, who was the most obliging of chaperons, considerably left the room by-and-by. She had a forgotten letter to write which must be posted that night; and she refused Jack's rather faint suggestion of lights, and went to her room to write it, leaving the two young people alone. They were both silent for a little while after the door closed. Winnie leant back in her chair with her pretty head resting against the dark velvet cushion and her hands clasped upon her knee, and Jack stood by the mantel-piece and watched her with a perfect contentment in his eyes. Winnie, looking up by-and-by, coloured vividly as she met his gaze, and her heart throbbed with a strange sensation—partly of delight and partly of nervous apprehension—which was quite new to her; as a rule she was a very self-possessed young lady, but at that moment her mind was agitated by the fear that Jack might have overheard her remark to Mrs. Maxwell, and she felt unusually nervous and bashful, and half inclined to get up and leave the room.

"What o'clock is it? Nearly time to dress for dinner, I suppose," she said at last, and she half rose from her chair.

Jack put his hand gently on her shoulder and pushed her back.

"You must not move for half-an-hour yet," he said in a quiet, authoritative voice. "This is the pleasantest hour of the whole twenty-four, and I am not going to be defrauded of it." He paused an instant, then said with an abruptness which almost took Winnie's breath away: "I have often wondered of whom you reminded me, Winnie, and I have only just found out. You are like my mysterious visitor!"

"Am I indeed?"

Winnie started at the words, and cast a comical glance at him from under her dark lashes. "I thought you did not see her face?"

"I did not—not distinctly at least—but still you remind me of her. I wish I could get to the bottom of that mystery," Jack went on musingly. "I have had many strange experiences in my time; but that certainly was the strangest and most unaccountable I ever came across, and I would give a good deal to solve its mystery."

"Would you?"

Winnie gave a queer little smile. She glanced at him with an odd look of mingled amusement and doubt. "I too had a strange experience on last All Hallow's Eve," she said, with a little hesitation in her voice. "I have never told it to anyone because it was so silly and I felt such a fool," she laughed nervously. "I have never spoken of it even to Annie."

"Was it as strange as my experience?"

"Quite, and much more unpleasant,"

Winnie answered with a little grimace. "Well, I will tell you then; but first of all promise—promise solemnly"—and she put her hand on his arm, and looked at him earnestly, "that you will never breathe a word of it to anyone."

Jack laughed.

"Wild horses shall not drag it from me, Miss Winnie. Go on; I swear inviolable secrecy."

"Well, then," and Winnie hesitated a moment, "this was how it happened. I was not very strong a year last October, and I came down to Whittlesea—you know the place, don't you?—that little seaside village near Southport—for change of air. While there a great desire to see my old home again came over me. Whittlesea is only twenty miles from Melville Hall, you know; so one afternoon, when my fit of homesickness was stronger than usual, I started off. It was evening when I reached the station, and I did not care to come to the Hall at that late hour, you see;" and she

looked up at him and smiled. "I did not know what manner of person the new owner was, and whether or not I should be welcome, so I walked through the wood to the gamekeeper's cottage. His wife used to be my maid, and I knew she would take me in for the night. As I expected, she was delighted to see me, and, as her husband was away, we sat chattering over the fire till quite late about the village, and the people, and the changes which had taken place since I left the Hall. I went to bed about half-past ten; but for a long time I could not sleep. If you remember, it was a wild, stormy night, with a high wind, and showers of sleet and rain; and wind and rain together made such a noise that for a long time sleep was impossible. Then, as I lay awake and listened to the strange noises outside in the wood, I remembered what night it was, and all kinds of odd thoughts and fancies came into my mind. I thought of the stories old Angélique used to tell me; of the weird banquet which, on that night, she used yearly to spread; and I wondered if the rite was still observed, and if, as in the old days, the cloth was spread and the food and wine were waiting, and the doors thrown open to welcome the souls of the dead. I grew quite frightened at last at my own thoughts, and I tried to think of other things; and by-and-by, as I was very tired, I went to sleep."

"Go on."

Jack's eyes, full of eager interest, looked at her intently as she paused. He drew nearer to her on the hearth-rug.

"Oh, go on," he said.

Winnie laughed nervously.

"Now I am coming to the stupid part," she said. "Well, I went to sleep, and I had"—and she shuddered—"a dreadful dream. I dreamt that I was dead and buried in the churchyard, close by Aunt Joan; and as I lay in my coffin the grave opened and someone called my name. I looked up and saw Aunt Joan standing by me in her grave-clothes, and she touched me on the shoulder, and bade me rise and come with her to our old home. 'It is All Hallows Eve,' she said, 'and the doors will be open, and the bread and wine will be spread, and we shall be welcome. Come.' And it seemed to me that, all at once, while she spoke, the air grew full of phantom forms with pale, eager faces, and there was a confused murmur of voices as of many people talking together in low, hushed tones. I recognised some of the

faces. One, of a little child, who had died a few days before I left home; another, our doctor's wife. She had only been dead a year, and yet already he had forgotten her and taken another wife. I remember feeling so sorry for her, and wondering what she would say when she reached her home and found that her place was filled; that her children had forgotten her; and that there was no welcome for her there! 'Come,' Aunt Joan said; and it seemed to me that I rose, and we went together across the fields and up through the avenue. The gate was locked, but it opened at her touch, and so we reached the house. As we expected, the door was open, and side by side we crossed the hall, and entered the dining-room, and stood by the table, and ate and drank the food and wine which was waiting there." She paused again, and looked up at Jack's intent face. "Now, do you understand?" she said.

"I shall presently. Go on," Jack said quietly. "Tell me all."

"There is not much to tell. As we crossed the Hall again I stumbled on the threshold and hit my head against the lintel. I suppose the sudden shock and the pain awoke me, for I became suddenly conscious that I was standing on the door-step with bare feet, shivering in the cold wind. I must tell you that long ago, when I was a child, I had a bad habit of walking in my sleep. I had thought I was cured; but I suppose not being very well, and in an excited nervous mood, the old habit had returned again. Oh, it was horrible to wake and find myself there, and in that guise!" and she shuddered and turned pale at the thought. "As bewildered and confused I stood there, I heard a voice and a quick footstep—yours, I suppose—in the hall. I had sense enough to know that if I ran down the drive I should be seen and overtaken; so I crouched down behind the great laurel bush by the door and waited—sick and half fainting with terror, and excitement, and cold—till I heard the door shut and barred, and knew that I was safe. Then I ran back through the wood to the cottage. The door was wide open—left open by me, I suppose—and I got in and went to bed without anyone seeing me; and the next morning I was so ashamed of myself, and so afraid lest some one might have seen and recognised me, that I made Ellen promise to keep my visit a profound secret; and went back to Whittlesea by the first train. So now"—

and she smiled sweetly—"since I have made my confession and solved the mystery, please forgive my long silence, Mr. Melville, and remember your promise."

"And so it was you, after all!"

Jack laughed softly, and stroked his big beard as he looked at her. "If I had only known, what hours of doubt and perplexity would have been spared to me! Poor little girl! And to think of you standing outside in the cold," his voice grew very soft and tender, he bent over her, and touched her soft hair caressingly, "with the snow and the rain falling on these golden locks, and the cruel wind piercing you through and through! Oh, if I had only known, my darling, how gladly I would have taken you in, and warmed and fed you, and made you welcome!" Jack cried passionately.

Indeed, the vision which rose before his eyes of his beautiful, fragile sweetheart, crouching behind the laurel bushes, shivering with terror, and cold, and wet, was so terrible to him, that even though it had all happened so long ago, and had been followed by no lasting evil results, Jack's tender heart thrilled with pity, and love, and vain self-reproach.

"Oh, if I had only known!" he cried.

"I am very glad you didn't know," Winnie said, with a soft laugh. "I durst never have looked you in the face again, if you had found me! I should have wanted to run away somewhere to the end of the world, and hide myself from you for ever and ever! Oh, how relieved I was last All Hallows Eve—do you remember?—when you told Annie and me your strange story, and I was quite, quite sure that my secret was unknown to any one!"

"Of course I remember. I am not likely to forget that night. It was the first time we met, you know," Jack said quietly; and then the hand that had touched her hair so tenderly dropped a little lower and took her white fingers in its strong clasp. "What were you and Mrs. Maxwell talking about just as I came in, Winnie?" he went on with an excited thrill in his deep voice. "I heard one sentence—oh, how happy it made me, and how glad I was to hear it, my dear!—I heard you say that no other house would ever seem so much like home as this. It has never been really home to me till this last fortnight, till you came back to it, my darling. It shall never have another mistress but you, and it is dull being here alone. Say, when will you come back to it and me, Winnie?"

There was a short silence. Winnie did not speak, but she did not draw her hand away, and Jack saw by the bright firelight a happy, flushed face, with sweet, misty eyes, and lips which quivered with glad surprise. The eyes looked into his, the lips moved as if to speak, and, though no words came, Jack seemed quite content with the silent answer, and, bending, took it from her lips in a long, silent kiss.

Several All Hallows Eves have come and passed since then, and still at Melville Hall the cloth is laid, and the doors are opened, and the food and wine are spread, that the poor souls—if any there be about—may enter in, and find a welcome ready! Jack, rightly or wrongly, attributes the great happiness of his life to the observance of these mystic rites, and declares that it would be rank ingratitude on his part to omit them. So year by year the feast is spread, and Jack and his wife sit by the fire side by side, and, half in jest, and half in earnest, watch through the midnight hour for the spectral guests, who—so far—have persistently declined to come!

#### THE BRAES OF SURREY.

It is for the banks and braes, not of bonnie Doon, but of the equally bonnie Wey—which is far more accessible than the other from the regions of Mesopotamia—that we plan an autumn ramble. And yet it is not for any particular stream or river-side that we are bound; but for a district which shall henceforth be known as the braes of Surrey. For the brae, as we understand the word, is just the rough-and-tumble country which generally fringes the higher ranges of hills—and such is the character of our favourite district, only, in this case, the higher ranges are wanting. Yet you have the wildness and freedom of the hills, and the sweet and pure breezes, and that without having far to climb to reach them. Then you have wide heaths and commons, rich valleys, broad downs and lovely ravines, sunken lanes, arched over with elm or beech, with many a pretty copse and dell, and often a charming brook or rill.

Now, this land of the braes is marked out plainly enough in white and red—the white of the chalk-down, the red of the sand-hill—roughly, in the form of a triangle, of which the apex is Dorking, while

the base lies between Haslemere and Farnham, and the longest sides of the figure are some twenty miles in length, while the base is only eight or nine. Dorking itself, and the bold, romantic scenery of Boxhill and Burford Bridge, lie rather outside our limits; but Dorking may be taken as a starting-point, and the highway from that town to Guildford soon brings us through rough commons, and past beautifully wooded ravines, to the village of Wotton and its fine old church, secluded and sheltered at the foot of the hills, with noble old beech trees crowning the velvet glades and lawns. And at Wotton we are in the county of John Evelyn—the “Diarist” and author of “*Sylva*.” His tomb is in the north aisle of the chancel—he learnt his rudiments, he tells us, in the very porch of the old church. At Wotton House the veteran died, and he has left traces of his woodcraft in many fine clumps and groups of ancient trees. To the south and still among the braes, well wooded and intersected with pleasant rivulets, where picturesque old water-mills are perched upon the banks, lies Abinger, with its little Norman church; and lanes and bridleways lead through still and solemn avenues of fir and larch to the very summit of Leith Hill, with wild and windy passages where the feeling is of ascending some steep mountain-side; from the summit, where the hill breaks steeply into the Wealden country below, lies a prospect of wondrous extent and charm. The extreme horizon is bounded by the pure and beautiful outlines of the South Downs, some twenty miles distant, with all old Andred’s Weald between, now cultivated and cleared, with villages, spires, halls, and meres, and yet a woodland scene through all. Ockley lies just below, the Aclea of the Saxon chronicles; and there is Saint Leonard’s Forest and Shelley’s birthplace, and Horsham’s handsome tower, and folds and fields, and parks and woods innumerable.

Then turning your back upon the far stretching lowlands, if you find the hill-track which leads down to Shere, you arrive at one of the nicest little villages in England, with a handsome old church and a trout stream clear and brisk which flows through Albury Park, where once Henry Drummond the banker ruled, and wrote his innumerable pamphlets on “*Currency*,” and “*The Church of New Jerusalem*.” Close by is Albury with its little Cathedral of the

Irvingite Church; and from there a breather up the face of the down brings one to Newlands Corner, where there is a charming prospect—not extensive like that of Leith Hill, but more intimate—of all the country of the braes, even as far as Crooksbury on its western border, seen just over the flank of Saint Martha’s Hill, crowned by its solemn old chapel. A line of hills, too, fills the landscape like the waves of a flooding tide, and opposite are the hills we have crossed, with Blackheath—black enough under the shadow of a cloud—Hartwood, and Holmbury. Down among the woods is the Silent Pool, ruffled by no breath of wind, a perfect mirror of the secluded thickets round about. And if we follow the ridge of the down for awhile towards the setting sun, we may arrive at a scene of perfect enchantment, circles of old yews and aged thorns glowing with scarlet haws and coral berries, and yet dark and funereal, ghostly alike in winter and summer. Wonderful nooks, too, are there in the downs hereabouts, opening to the sun, warm and genial in the coldest season of the year; winter gardens, where the dark green foliage of the yew, and arbutus, and juniper is festooned with the skeleton blossoms of the “traveller’s joy,” or wild clematis. And these nooks are generally furrowed with the outlines of ancient dwellings and strewn with innumerable chips of flint.

In the valley again we come to Chilworth, all among ponds and streams, with powder mills and paper mills established here and there among the dense underwood. Then comes the pretty village of Shalford, and we strike upon the River Wey, as it comes winding through the valley; and then Catherine’s Chapel stands forth from its grassy knoll—for this way brings us in the cool of the evening to Guildford. And here ends the first division of the country of the braes; for the gap at Guildford seems to divide the district into two separate sections; each with its own particular sentiment and charm.

And to open the second series, we prefer to make an entry by Guildford. And if you reach that town by rail, there is nothing in the pleasant but featureless country you passed through after leaving Woking, to raise any expectations beyond the common. But having plunged beyond Guildford, into the tunnel which burrows right under the chalk-downs,

you emerge into what seems to be a quite different region. There is a glimpse of a charming little church in a fairy nook as you pass from one section of the tunnel to another; and then you are fairly in the land of the braes, hills all round, a lovely winding river, meadows greener than elsewhere, trees more luxuriant, old timber houses, with the gleam of white chalk-cliffs and the gloom of pine-clad heights.

Then comes Godalming, the metropolis of this country apart, where the station is all embordered in foliage, and where in early summer-time there is a continuous concert of feathered songsters. The river is down below, and whiffs of smoke and steam, and glimpses of old weather-boarded factories and breweries, remind one of some valley in Normandy, where there is a similar mingling of verdure and manufactures; but the town is apart from the factories, which occupy the valley, while the High Street, with its shops and houses, strange and quaint, in old-fashioned brickwork, curls round toward the hill. Godalming is like Rome, with its seven hills, or perhaps more. It is a little Switzerland you may fancy, when the mists hang about the hill-sides, as if they were hiding other heights beyond. Houses are dotted everywhere; the new Charterhouse shines conspicuously from its own particular height, while another summit seems devoted to the high scholastic staff. But wandering further afield, there is Hascombe, with its beeches; and Park Hatch, where you open the gate of the lowlands again; and Hambleton, with its heathy wilds. Wherever you go, you can hardly get far wrong as long as you keep within the confines of the Surrey Highlands. As you reach their limits, ever and again you get glimpses, through woodland openings, and over broken ground, of the wide Wealden plain, bits which our water-colour painters have made familiar.

Then you reach the country which is pre-eminently the artist's home—where quaintly devised houses and cottages stud the hill-side—Witley and Thursley, which are separated from Godalming by a wide and windy heath, where once a gibbet stood, and dead malefactors swung in chains. Hereabouts are traces of old iron-works, and hammer ponds contrived to keep up a head of water, to work the ponderous hammers of the iron founders. Beyond Thursley the country still assumes a still

wilder aspect; and the roads wind among a series of heights, which in certain lights assume a weird and menacing aspect. There is Hindhead, a really noble promontory, about which sometimes the clouds gather sublimely. To stand by the white cross at night on the summit of Hindhead, far away from human ken, while mists circle round and the night birds wail ominously, gives a shiver which is worth experiencing. The cross marks the place where three men were hung in chains for the murder of a sailor, down there in that darksome hollow, with the steep scarped sides, which is called the Devil's Punch Bowl. And the cross was erected by an English Judge of later days, as much in memory of the murderers as of the murdered. The grave of the sailor is down there in Thursley Churchyard, adorned by some country mason with a spirited sculpture, baso-relievo, of the murder; thus, at least, it struck the present writer, who saw it some years ago, one dark night, exploring among the tombs by the light of a lantern dimly burning.

Still keeping among the braes we reach the Devil's Jumps, three curious conical mounds, from one to the other of which His Majesty is said to have hopped when caught by returning daylight at his work in the Punch Bowl. Beyond is Frensham, with its great pond some three miles round, with plenty of fish among its reedy pools, a resort of wild fowl in the winter. And then we reach Tilford, lying in an elbow of the river Wey, with an ancient stone bridge and a famous old village green, with a mighty oak in the centre, beneath which King John is said to have rested when on progress through these regions.

Crooksbury seems to command all this neighbourhood—a conical summit crowned with firs, at the foot of which may be found Moor Park, where Sir William Temple once paced the formal gardens, attended by his secretary, one Jonathan Swift.

Stella's cottage is not far off—for Stella was a daughter of one of Sir William's bailiffs—in a charming nook of the river, too, close by Waverley Abbey, the chief settlement of the Cistercians in England.

From this neighbourhood we get a full view of the long, narrow hill which bounds our country on the north: a hill, like a wall built by giant hands, straight as a ruler and running right on end

for some eight miles, a perfect knife edge of chalk, cut out in the strange perpendicular fashion by who can say what natural causes. A road crowns the hill from one end to the other, with a fine panoramic view on either hand.

It is a relief to descend by a cutting into one of the pleasant villages which lie under its shelter—Puttenham, or Compton, with its curious ancient church, and its double chancel, arch over arch. There is a church at Puttenham, too, as the writer well remembers, being at service there one sleepy Sunday afternoon. It was in the heat of the Franco-Prussian War, and the sermon had reference to the fearful drama then being acted in the fair land of France; and, indeed, there was to be a collection in aid of the fund for assistance to the wounded on both sides. Our parson gave a very graphic description of the siege of Paris. You could hear the guns thundering and see the shells hurtling through the air this quiet Sunday afternoon—one shell in particular—as you followed the preacher's hand describing its curve as it finally dropped into the pulpit cushion. At the same moment there was a tremendous crash, followed by piercing cries. The scene was becoming too realistic. But it was only a little Sunday-school girl, who had tumbled backwards off a form.

Last stage of all is Farnham, which lies just a little outside our limits. And yet a very little; for if a cannon were fired from Guildford along the crest of the Hog's Back, it may be believed that the ball would go on rolling and rolling, the road being a smooth and good one, till it plumped into Farnham town. But it is quite a foreign town to us dwellers among the braes. The hops and the hop-gardens, and the hop-kilns, square and new—they are not so pretty as the old Kentish hop-kilns, or oast-houses, with their conical roofs and great white cowls; but all this seems foreign to us, and so are the soldiers, and the smart officers and the stylish officers' wives, on foot, on horse-back, in coquettish little tax-carts.

Yes, all this is strange and foreign. Sturdy old Cobbett, who sleeps in the churchyard there, under a tombstone as square and sturdy as himself, would hardly recognise the quiet country town, where he was born and reared, among those rural sights and sounds, which ring so charmingly in his works every now and then. But there is little changed in the

Castle, that ancient stronghold of the militant Bishop of Winchester; when its noble avenues of beeches are turning russet red once more; and when the hops have been garnered in, and the last pocket of the golden beauties, all fragrant as a nosegay, has been despatched to the Borough.

## "CLOSER THAN A BROTHER."

By G. B. STUART.

A STORY IN THIRTEEN CHAPTERS.

### CHAPTER IX—MOTHERLY CONFIDENCES.

It is not to be supposed that Mr. Bulteel's return from Australia to his rightful home had passed without comment from "the county," among whose ranks the Bulteel family had always held its own; the neighbouring gentry had all called and left their cards on the new Squire, and had offered him such entertainment as his recent mourning admitted of. The news of the fire spread even more rapidly than the flames themselves had done, and brought a fresh influx of visitors to Bulteel: everyone was anxious to have the rights of the rescue story. Was it really true that Mr. Bulteel had pulled out with his own hands a dozen sleepers from their burning beds? Or, as another version had it, had he saved the family plate and jewel safe by a superhuman exhibition of strength and courage at the last moment, as the roof fell in ruins about him? Anyhow he was the hero of the hour; and if he did not enjoy the position, his stepmother did so thoroughly. Every afternoon Mrs. Bulteel established herself in the big drawing-room, which had been reopened since the destruction of the boudoir, and awaited possible callers in the freshest of "Marie Stuart" caps, and the most elaborate of jet ornaments, a combination of effects which robbed her widow's dress of all its sombreness.

A great square sofa was drawn up on one side of the fire; Mrs. Bulteel's own little wicker table with its novels, its scent-bottle, its nosegay of hothouse flowers, its hundred-and-one necessities, stood close beside it; and here Mrs. Bulteel was to be found on these sunny April afternoons, dozing a little now and then, with her black satin shoes tucked under a white fleecy shawl, or waking up with a pleased start, and two hurried hands to the coquettish widow's cap, if the big bell at the front door clanged through the house.

Sometimes the visitors were gentlemen who asked for Mr. Bulteel; but they were invariably shown into the drawing-room, according to Mrs. Bulteel's injunctions; Mr. Bulteel could be sent for; but she would not have the library invaded, when Dr. Morton had particularly ordered that he was to keep quiet as long as there was any danger of inflammation for the injured arm.

John was generally unearthed from his seclusion to find his stepmother laughing and chatting with an impromptu afternoon party; he had even caught the expression, "my big son," and knew that Mrs. Bulteel must be advancing her favourite hypothesis that she and her stepson were about the same age, which, as John was known to be five-and-thirty, gave his stepmother a decided push backward. He felt himself dreadfully out of place on these occasions, and would stand in obvious martyrdom while some county magnate, or, worse still, some magnate's wife, cross-questioned him on the subject of the fire, and, finding his version differed considerably from those already in circulation, contrived to make him aware that he ought to have behaved as heroically as they had imagined, that, in fact, he had been weighed in the balance and found wanting.

The way in which they generally wound up, "Oh, is that all? I understood that it had been very much more serious!" left poor John with an uncomfortable idea, that he ought to have encouraged rather than have extinguished the fire; and he had not the necessary powers of conversation to turn the subject with a joke, or a repartee.

The dowagers were scarcely less terrible than their daughters, tall, blooming young ladies, for the most part, with plumed hats that added quite a cubit to their already important stature; they were quite ready to be friendly with their new neighbour, whose arm in a sling, not to speak of his reputed adventures, and their satisfactory termination on the hereditary acres, appealed to their sympathies; but somehow they did not come up to the "Wambo Ideal," as May had once mockingly called it, and, in spite of their best efforts, made little way with the new Squire of Bulteel. How were they to get on with a man who was utterly ignorant of the commonest topics of the day; who, in spite of a large landed estate, failed to shudder at the Irish Home Rule Bill, or the mention of Mr. Henry George; who knew as little of

popular actors as he did of fashionable preachers; who, in fact, was as completely "out of it," as if he were still raising his sheep in Queensland? The mothers and daughters, as they drove home in their immense barouches, agreed that Mr. Bulteel would be very little addition to their society, "unless he opens out unexpectedly," a saving clause which they insinuated, in order to cover any change of front, should he begin to pay marked addresses to anybody's girls. The young men discovered that he knew a horse when he saw one, but were astounded to find that this fact did not "make" him conversationally; indeed, John, with his anxious notions of what was or was not a fitting topic of conversation, would as soon have thought of discussing his boots in public, as his stables. So his presence, though it added a lustre, also contributed a certain restraint to Mrs. Bulteel's gatherings; she always kept one eye upon her stepson, and one ear strained to catch anything he might say, while she volubly explained to old Lady Blatherwick or Colonel Grabham, what a comfort it was to have a gentleman in the house again; how she had longed to bring about dear John's restitution; and how often he reminded her, in little things, of her dear husband.

There was one ceremony on these occasions which John had acquired to perfection, and always performed with alacrity—the ringing of the drawing-room bell, and the subsequent speeding of the parting guests to their carriages, when the talking and tea-drinking came to an end.

"What sort of a figure should I cut in a drawing-room?" John Bulteel had once said to his partner at Wambo; and the Squire recollected this speech with a rueful smile as he came back to the drawing-room after showing out the last of his guests, the Rev. Charles Haddington, who, as Vicar of the parish, had come to pay a congratulatory visit after the fire, and had sat for nearly two hours without attempting to address the gentleman of the house.

"I suppose they all think me a lout, and they are not far wrong. I wonder how long I shall stick to it? I don't seem to improve, and I certainly haven't begun to enjoy it yet! A good tussle with 'Snow-storm' in the Park, and that fight with the fire the other night, are the two pieces of gratification which I have got out of Bulteel so far. A confession that would surprise the Vicar, with his twaddle about the Latin cut of the new surplices and the

shade of purple best adapted for book-markers in Lent! I wonder if he is a man, or I? whether two natures, as utterly distinct as ours, are to be weighed—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Bulteel, I did not catch what you said."

"I was saying how devoted, how earnest Mr. Haddington always is in all he undertakes."

"Yes; he seems anxious enough to get the right kind of ribbons."

"He told me he had written three times to the Ecclesiastical Emporium, as well as to the School of Art, and they weren't right then."

"Indeed! I wonder he could spare so much time for mere visiting with such an important affair on hand."

"It's quite settled now," Mrs. Bulteel assured him triumphantly. "He showed me a little pattern of the silk; it is being made specially at Coventry for the purpose. Such a lovely purple! No one else has seen it but myself; and it is to be ready by Palm Sunday. He knows how we all sympathise here with his work."

"To be sure," John answered gravely. He perceived that his stepmother liked talking about the Vicar, and a sudden illumination prompted him to ask: "You don't think he comes here for any special purpose, do you?"

"My dear John, what special purpose could he have?"

"Oh, I didn't know. I thought, perhaps, as he sat so long, he was waiting for May to come in."

"May! Oh, dear no! You are quite mistaken. I am sure he only takes the most fatherly interest in May." Mrs. Bulteel grew quite pink in her endeavours to disabuse John of this absurd idea. "Mr. Haddington isn't at all the sort of person to be taken with a young girl. I know him so well; and I have often heard him speak of the charm and repose of early middle age. He likened it, I recollect, so poetically to the bloom on—"

"I'm going to look for May; it's time she was back," John said, cutting short his stepmother's reminiscences.

"Oh, stop a minute," pleaded Mrs. Bulteel, "it is so seldom I get you alone, John, and I do so want to have a little private talk about May. Has she said anything to you about leaving Bulteel?"

"No, nothing; and I sincerely hope she won't."

"I knew you'd say that; you are so

considerate, John. But, of course, you have guessed darling May's little secret?"

"No, I haven't." John had been fidgeting to be off; but now he came back to the hearth-rug and took up his position there as if he knew Mrs. Bulteel was "in" for a long story. "But if it is a secret, you had better not tell it to me." Yet his voice had an anxious ring in it, which had been absent when he spoke of Mr. Haddington and his bookmarkers.

"Oh," said Mrs. Bulteel, "there is no harm in letting you behind the scenes a little; lookers-on see the most of the game, they say," with a simper; "but I fancy, with gentlemen this scarcely holds good, they so often seem quite unaware of the little romances which are being played right in front of them. Is it possible that you have not observed that dear May and Arthur Twisden have a liking for each other?"

"Is that so?"

"Why, it has been going on ever since they were boy and girl together; before even I came to Bulteel; so, as I often told your dear father, I was not accountable for it."

"Are they engaged then?"

"Softly, softly, my dear John. You would have us 'woo'd, and married, and a' in your rapid Colonial fashion; but there are little difficulties, sometimes, as to ways and means, which even clip Cupid's wings."

"What are they in this case?"

"Well, you know, most people looked on May as her father's heiress, and, though old Taper knew that the will was in your favour, I don't suppose he ever mentioned the subject to Arthur; consequently, it must have been a great surprise and a certain disappointment—you'll excuse me, I know—when you returned to inherit here. Arthur has to make his way in the world, and he might not like to ask May to leave such a home as Bulteel until his position was more assured. She has her own three hundred a year, to be sure; but that is not much in comparison with her expectations when you were distant and in disgrace. I think this makes her restless, and just a tiny bit unsatisfied, and has suggested the idea of a separate home—"

"But I have always understood that had I died, or, had my father chosen after all to disinherit me, Bulteel would have gone to the Warwickshire branch—a parson, I believe—with whom the Squire

quarrelled furiously—according to Twisden—and to whom I am indebted for my inheritance as much as to anybody. It appears the Squire hated him even more than he did me!"

"Oh, hush!" cried Mrs. Bulteel, scandalised; "you mustn't say such things, you really mustn't! Your father never had the slightest intention of leaving the property to Mr. James Bulteel, who is an old man and a bachelor, as well as an invalid, who would not thank you for bothering him with a landed estate. At least, after our marriage, there was never any idea of eventually disinheriting you, and, as time went on, your father perceptibly softened, and allowed himself to be swayed to a great extent by me"—a polite fiction which had grown up since the Squire's demise—"but the supposition still lingered in many people's minds that May would be a great heiress, and would get all the funded property which could be separated from the estate. I daresay this would have been the case, at least to a more considerable extent, had not your father kept an eye upon you, through Mr. Taper, and learnt that you were doing remarkably well in Queensland, and making money."

John had for some moments been impatiently teasing the fire with the poker, though to all appearances it was satisfactory enough; at this juncture, he contrived to dislodge an immense lump of coal, which fell with a clatter, spluttering sparks and dust in every direction; Mrs. Bulteel shrieked, and clutched at her "Eau de Portugal," and John began raking out the grate, and repairing the damage with all the fire-irons at once.

"Then it is a pity I ever left Queensland," he remarked, having built up the fire again. "I was at home there, which I shall never be in England, and I interfered with nobody's prospects, matrimonial or pecuniary."

"You must not speak like that," Mrs. Bulteel said peremptorily, having succeeded thoroughly in her object, "or I shall regret having spoken at all on this subject. But I thought that May might say something to you about leaving Bulteel, and I would speak to you first, that you might understand that it was just a little natural

girlish restlessness which would pass off by-and-by."

"She really loves Twisden, then?"

"Why, didn't you guess that from her wish to drive into Barkham the other evening? What else could have induced her, but to see a little more of Arthur? Ah, John, it is plain to see you have never been in love, or you would know the signs of it more quickly: wait a bit till your own time comes?"

Some stupid people thought Mrs. Bulteel perfectly insufferable, when she put on airs of archness; others, Mr. Haddington among them, thought that no mood became her so admirably, and in the latter opinion she herself concurred heartily.

"How hot this room is, and how warm you both look!" said May, coming in from her School of Art lesson, her cheeks pink from the evening air, and her hair tossed a little by the wind; she pulled off her cloth jacket as she spoke, and the little bunch of violets which she always wore at her neck, jumped from their button-hole and fell at John's feet.

"Do you want these?" he asked, picking them up.

"Not a bit—but they are dead—I have worn them all day. Why don't you tell Macpherson to send you in a proper button-hole every evening if you care for flowers?" for her brother was fastening them in his coat, a little crushed bunch tied with a morsel of yellow silk.

"These are good enough for me," he said.

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